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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for creating the kind of accountability that will help New York City's lowest performing schools by developing mechanisms to improve the school system's transparency and by increasing parent and community access, representation, and power in schools and districts. Part 1, "Governance Reform Alone Won't Improve Our Schools," focuses on the fact that previous governance reforms have failed to connect schools and communities (community control and decentralization, the 1996 reform, and centralizing power in 2002); schools improve through local action, not top-down mandates; and the limitations of parent associations in low performing schools. Part 2, "Creating New Relationships between Our Schools and Our Communities," discusses four indicators of community accountability (transparency, representation, power, and oversight). Part 3, "Implementing Community Accountability in New York City's Schools," presents steps for implementing community accountability and offers indicators of effective implementation. (SM)

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POLICY REPORT

DRUM MAJOR INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

From Governance to Accountability

Building relationships that make schools work

By Kavitha Mediratta and Norman Fruchter

New York University Institute for Education and Social Policy

FOR THE DRUM MAJOR INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

JANUARY 2003

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President of the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy 5

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FOREWORD

In 1969, I was on the ramparts for decentralization and Community School Boards. Today, I am pleased to be part of an effort to envision a time beyond them.

The most important task for New Yorkers today is not to come up with a new structural arrangement for our schools. Instead, we must accept responsibility for re-envisioning our schools as public institutions that serve students, parents and communities.

If we have learned anything from our experiences with the 1969 legislation that brought us decentralization, and the 1996 legislation that created School Leadership Teams, it is that governance reforms alone don't improve public education. Past governance reforms changed structures, but they didn't create the deep, sustained relationships between schools and communities that could actually improve public education.

In the spring of 2002, as the certainty of mayoral control was near, I became concerned that the city was looking at a next round of governance reform as the panacea for the system's failings. The Drum Major Institute for Public Policy—an institute created during the civil rights movement whose mission today is to offer progressive competition in the marketplace of ideas—convened a forum: "Redefining the Governance Debate: From the Relationship Up." Three members of our distinguished panel had created successful public schools. And each of the founders saw the strong relationships they built with communities as integral to their success.

The data support their experiences. Children with involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, pass their classes, attend school regularly, possess better social skills, behave better in school, graduate, and go on to college. The presence of parents and communities improves the climate of a school. Teachers are more effective when parents and communities support their efforts. Reforms are more likely to be sustained when parents and communities are behind them.

So why haven't schools reached out to parents and communities? It's not for a lack of governance reform. It's because low performing schools lack the skills, support, and incentive to reach out to parents and communities as partners. Unless the current round of governance reform helps schools and districts develop the relationships critical to school improvement, it will have the same minimal impact as the reforms that preceded it.

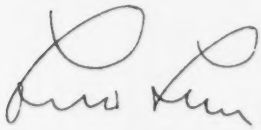
The Drum Major Institute reached out to the New York University Institute for Education and Social Policy to push the public debate from top-down governance to bottom-up accountability. We quickly realized that a much larger issue was at stake than what should replace community school boards. Regardless of structure, our schools and administrators need to learn to work differently.

We propose that the school system move the issue of parent and community involvement from the periphery to the center. Our paper presents

a series of indicators to help schools, districts, and the central system evaluate how well they are engaging their most important partners. As the system considers its progress in improving student attendance, test scores, and teacher-student ratios, it must also examine its progress towards forging meaningful relationships with the community.

We have discussed our proposal with legislators, community organizations, parents and the private sector. It has met with support.

Making schools accountable to communities is an easy concept to give lip service to. Sure, we'll let parents sit on a council here, a board there. But we have seen the reality: unless educators have the will and capacity to work differently, their relationships to surrounding communities will not improve, and the ultimate goal of better schools will elude us all.



Fernando Ferrer
President, Drum Major Institute for Public Policy

INTRODUCTION

NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS RETURNED to class this past fall in a system whose command structure was streamlined, newly centralized and primed for improvement. The city's media, political leadership and policy experts celebrated this new power alignment as a long-awaited opportunity to transform the city's schools. Yet the view from below—from the city's parents, community residents, neighborhood organizations, and individual teachers—is of a system so distant and impenetrable that it has resisted past attempts at improvement and will resist this latest effort as well. Despite decades of effort to make previous governance reforms work, school quality varies predictably across the city, there are far too many poorly performing schools, and those schools are still concentrated in the city's high poverty neighborhoods. Meaningful involvement of parents and community constituencies in those neighborhoods is still peripheral to the system's policymakers, despite research demonstrating that greater involvement helps increase student academic achievement.

If top-down governance could ensure that the city's schools provide high quality education to all children, the latest governance reform would generate celebration throughout the city's poor neighborhoods and communities of color. But no evidence suggests that centralizing power will deliver the kind of whole-system transformation necessary to improve the city's lowest performing schools.[1]

The perennial struggle over top-down versus local control of our schools —the policy oscillation between centralization and decentralization— distracts us from developing relationships based on mutual obligation and trust between schools, districts and their communities. Instead, current limited relationships are structured through governance entities—parent associations, school leadership teams and school boards. These governance structures have not created the capacity or the incentive among educators to engage the students, families and communities who could be their greatest ally in improvement efforts. Instead of focusing on governance, we must develop bottom-up accountability: new relationships between schools, districts, and their parent and community constituencies that foster school accountability for improved academic outcomes.

This paper argues for creating that kind of accountability by developing mechanisms to improve the school system's transparency, and by increasing parent and community access, representation and power in schools and districts. To make that argument, we first trace the struggles of parents and communities of color for accountability in our city's schools. We analyze why the current governance structures, and the one-way

[1] Kirst, Michael W., *Mayoral Influence, New Regimes and Public School Governance*. (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education: May 2002.)

accountability they attempt to enforce, won't improve our poorly performing schools. We then examine the implications of bottom-up or community accountability, and offer a set of indicators of new accountability roles and relationships. As the New York State Legislative Task Force considers options for what should replace community school boards, we urge it to create a system of community accountability that re-builds the linkages among parents, youth, communities and schools.

PART I. GOVERNANCE REFORM ALONE WON'T IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS

THE HISTORY OF WHO GOVERNS THE NEW YORK CITY SCHOOLS is a history of conflict. The recurring struggle of parents and community advocates for control of their schools erupted into open conflict in the 1960s. The frustration that fueled that explosion continues to divide the city's communities of color from the largely white bureaucracy and teaching force. Parents and communities of color have long charged that principals, school boards, and district and central administrations failed to improve poorly performing schools because those schools serve other people's children. For the past half-century, much of the city's middle class has bought out of public education. Current support among civic elites and the media for the latest effort at centralized governance suggests a renewed consensus that school decision-making must be insulated from parents and community forces.

1. Previous governance reforms have failed to connect schools and communities. Over the last century, control of the New York City schools has oscillated between local communities and the central office. The progressive movement of the early 1900's transformed schools from community institutions to professional bureaucracies. The progressives' reforms, centralizing the board of education under a citywide superintendent, and granting teachers civil service status, were intended to end corruption and patronage, and more efficiently educate the city's growing immigrant populations of Italian, Polish and Russian Jews. Our city's schools remained under the control of a citywide superintendent, with an advisory panel of local representatives, until the 1960's, when the growing number of African-American and Latino students created new pressure for reform. Frustrated by the failure of years of grassroots struggle to force the city to integrate the public education system, African-American and Latino communities began to demand the right to run their own schools.

Community control and decentralization

New York City's decentralized system was created in 1969, after widespread parent and community protests against the Board of Education's failure to educate children in the city's low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Community activists won the right to create three demonstration school districts in which communities would elect representatives to govern their schools and choose their principals. But after these community districts were established, a decision by one of the new district administrations to transfer some teachers led to a citywide strike by the teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers. To end the conflict, a compromise solution was negotiated and ratified by the New York State Legislature, which created a decentralized governance structure that divided the city school system into six high school superintendencies and thirty-two Community School Districts.[2] Community School Boards operated

[2] The 1968 legislation created 31 Community School Districts. District 16 was later subdivided into two districts.

the elementary and middle schools in those thirty-two districts, and appointed superintendents, principals and assistant principals. Board members were elected to three-year terms. Registered voters living within the district boundaries, and parents of children attending the district's schools, including non-citizen immigrant parents, were eligible to vote in school board elections.

At the city level, the school system was governed by a seven-member Board of Education, primarily responsible for appointing the Schools Chancellor and setting citywide education policy. Each of the city's five borough presidents selected one board member; the Mayor selected two. The Central administration controlled high schools, special education, and key operational functions such as budgeting, personnel, accounting, building construction, maintenance and leasing, food services, transportation, security, purchasing and collective bargaining.

The 1969 decentralization law was criticized as soon as it was passed. Reformers charged that the community school boards encompassed too large a geographic area, and yoked together too many dissimilar and often oppositional neighborhoods. Many observers argued that the law deliberately created wasteful conflict between the central administration and the community school boards because it bifurcated so many essential schooling powers and responsibilities. Others argued that the scope of community school board governance had been severely limited because the central administration retained control over so many key functions. Parents and community advocates complained that principals, school boards and the central administration continued to deny responsibility for improving failing schools, particularly in the city's poorest neighborhoods and in communities of color. Instead of creating new relationships between schools, parents and their communities, the decentralization redefined governance but failed to reduce the barriers separating school practitioners from the parents and communities they served.

The 1996 reform

Because three decades of decentralization failed to significantly improve the quality of education in most of the city's poor neighborhoods, and because corruption and educational neglect were endemic in at least a third of the city's community school boards, demands for reforming the city's school governance structure intensified throughout the 1980's and 1990's. In February 1996, Chancellor Rudy Crew took over two Bronx school boards, citing allegations of corruption. He then escalated his campaign to reduce the power of school boards, primarily by shifting their hiring and oversight powers to district superintendents. The Mayor and state legislative leaders called for centralizing governance under the Mayor, borough boards or an expanded central board, and offered a variety of proposals for parental participation at the school-level. In response, community-based organizations and parents began organizing for the creation

of Chicago-style school councils through which significant parental decision-making authority would be lodged in local schools.

The New York State Legislature convened a special legislative session in December 1996 and passed another compromise bill. This new governance legislation centralized and augmented Chancellor and district superintendent authority over administrative appointments, and expanded school-level authority over planning for instructional improvement and budgeting. Community school boards were stripped of much of their power, retaining responsibility only for overseeing the superintendent selection process, recommending superintendent candidates, voting on zoning, and convening public meetings. The Chancellor gained the authority to hire and remove district superintendents, and to take control of poorly performing schools and districts, on the basis of persistent educational failure. District superintendents gained sole authority to operate their district's schools, the power to appoint and remove principals and hold them accountable for school performance, as well as the power to allocate district funds and approve school budgets. The law mandated a role for parents on school teams (School Leadership Teams or SLTs) established to develop school improvement plans and school budgets; these teams were required to have a balance of school staff and parent members.

The legislature's move was hailed as historic—supporters believed that curtailing community school boards' power would remove a longstanding obstacle to systemic reform. But for many parents and community-based organizations, the 1996 reform was simply another setback in the continuing struggle to make their schools accountable. Because the reform failed to increase school and district capacity to engage with communities, many schools and districts assimilated the reform into their traditional practices. A 1999 study of parent and community groups' experience of the new school governance implementation found "enormous resistance to the new roles of parents and community-based organizations, a lack of intervention by Central and superintendents in schools with a history of failure, and the continued practice of appointing administrators on the basis of relationships rather than performance."[3]

Recentralizing in 2002

The 1996 reform was perceived as an insufficient structural change. After significant lobbying from former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the city's private sector and editorial pages and newly elected Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the New York State Legislature passed yet another school governance reform measure in June 2002 to increase the mayor's investment in the city's schools by consolidating governance authority in the office of the mayor. This legislation gave the mayor sole responsibility over Chancellor and superintendent appointments. An advisory education committee, the Panel for Educational Policy, with a majority of its 13 members

[3] Mediratta, Kavitha and Ju Wan Choi (1999): *School Governance Reform – Two years later*. New York: NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy.

appointed by the Mayor, replaced the seven-member Board of Education. Community school boards were to be phased out by June 2003. The law required the legislative task force to develop a proposal for forms of parent and community participation to replace community school boards, although whatever arrangements are ultimately legislated will have no formal governance role.[4]

2. Schools improve through local action, not top-down mandates. The shift of power from locally elected community school boards to the central office in 1996, and to the mayor's office in 2002, is part of a national movement to impose rigorous student achievement standards on all schools, and particularly on poorly performing schools, and drive improvement through centrally mandated programs. The underlying theory is that schools will do a better job and students will learn more if a politically accountable mayor pushes reform down a clearly delineated chain of command through the bureaucracy to the schools. Thus mayoral control has replaced elected or appointed school boards in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, Boston and other smaller cities.

But mayoral control is insufficient to change the limited capacity for effective classroom instruction, school organization, teacher support and development of poorly performing schools and districts.[5] The core functions of teaching and learning must be transformed, school-by-school, and that transformation requires local investment, control and capacity. Replacing ineffective leadership with dynamic leadership, developing the skills of teaching staffs, and transforming dysfunctional school cultures into learning communities focused on continuous improvement requires the constant, hands-on involvement of school and district leadership. In poorly performing schools that have been severed from their communities through decades of bureaucratic insulation and professional defensiveness, such transformation also requires the development of bottom-up accountability, which means supporting the creation of new relationships with parents and community that foster the linkages, transparency and leverage necessary to make these schools work.

Though the pace of governance reforms has quickened, the latest reforms, by themselves, will not help schools or districts improve student achievement. Past reforms, as well as the current governance change, have altered structures, but have not provided the incentive or support for improving the core relationships of effective schooling—the relationships between schools, parents, and communities. Neither the past governance reforms, nor the parent or parent teacher associations upon which much of our current governance structures rest, have increased school accountability to parents, students, and communities for improved educational outcomes.

[4] The law requires the task force to submit a preliminary report to the governor and legislature by December 15, 2002, and a final report by February 15, 2003.

[5] Elmore, Richard, "Testing Trap," *Harvard Magazine* (September- October 2002).

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3. The limitations of parent associations in low performing schools. Parents are involved in the New York City schools almost exclusively through school-based parent or parent-teacher associations. But effective parent participation encompasses far more than joining parent associations. Effective involvement is generally understood as parent or family participation in school and home-based activities that support student learning. Parents are expected to take on a variety of roles, from attending school events and teacher/parent meetings to raising money and serving as parent association leaders, as well as helping their children at home. Because students come to school with different levels of preparation and support for academic success, effective parent involvement bridges the gap between home and school, inducts parents into the behavioral and academic expectations of the school, and exposes educators to the realities of students' lives outside the school. Much research indicates that parents who are thus involved help their children perform better in schools, and help schools better identify and meet student needs.[6]

Although parent involvement is critical to effective schools, race, class and cultural differences affect how well schools encourage that involvement. Parent-school relationships are shaped by families' class status, and racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Several studies have established that middle-class parents are more likely to be actively involved in their children's education, and their efforts are more likely to lead to student success, than those of working-class or poor parents. Although all parents have high aspirations for their children's education, middle class parents are more likely than working class or poor parents to anticipate school expectations, and to possess and deploy those cultural resources that schools value.[7] Annette Lareau and other researchers have demonstrated that, because of their class status, middle class parents are able to transmit a kind of cultural capital to their children in the form of attitudes, preferences, behaviors and credentials that facilitate inclusion, successful participation, and upward mobility in schools and other social institutions.[8]

The ways in which race shapes educators' low expectations for student achievement and, therefore, the quality of instruction they provide, have also been shown to contribute to the distance between families of color and schools. "Many black [and other minority] families, given the historical legacy of racial discrimination in schools, cannot presume or trust that their children will be treated fairly in school. Yet, they encounter rules of the game in which educators define desirable family-school relationships

[6] Henderson, Anne and Nancy Berla, (1994), *The Family is Critical to Student Achievement: A New Generation of Evidence*. Cambridge and Washington DC: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

[7] Lareau, Annette (1987), "Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The importance of cultural capital." *Sociology of Education*, 60. April, 73-85.

[8] Lamont, Michele and Annette Lareau (1998), "Cultural capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments," *Sociological Theory*, 6: 153-168. Bourdieu, Pierre (1977), *Outline to a Theory of Practice*. London: Cambridge University Press; Bourdieu, Pierre and J.C. Passeron (1977), *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Beverly Hills: Sage.

as based on trust, partnership, cooperation with and deference to white school officials. These rules are more difficult for black than white parents to comply with"(Lareau and Horvat).[9]

In middle class schools in New York City, parents and school practitioners work within a similar cultural context. In schools serving poor and working class neighborhoods and communities of color, they do not. If educators come with experiences and assumptions based on middle-class (particularly white) social and cultural norms, how should schools respond to the children of working class and poor families and communities of color who come to schools with a different set of social and cultural histories, experiences, and assumptions? What happens in schools and districts where no efforts are made to ground instruction in what children bring to school, or to bridge home and school cultures? Where, instead, the schools' overarching assumption is that cultural differences are irrelevant to instruction, and that all children, whatever their backgrounds, must learn in prescribed ways? Where parents are considered a hindrance, and incapable of helping their kids? And where schools have little capacity for effective instruction?

Several prominent school reformers have developed programs to bridge home and school cultures; James Comer's School Development Program, for example, has helped to improve achievement by closing the gap between parents and schools in New Haven, Connecticut, Prince George's County, Maryland and several other urban districts. But our city's poorly performing schools—schools with high levels of staff turnover, weak leadership, and little sense of connection to the community or trust among adults or between adults and students—have not built frameworks to bridge the differing assumptions, resources, and expectations that too often separate home and school cultures. Instead, poorly performing schools and districts support professional cultures that serve the interests of adults, not students. These cultures have their own norms and assumptions about the capacities of students' families and what they can contribute to student success. When the few "good" parents, as the school defines them, are socialized into these professional cultures, they come to see reality from the school's perspective. They tend to be closely allied with the principal and staff, and to side with the school in placing the blame for school failure on other, less involved parents. Thus, many poorly performing schools maintain a tiny parent association, composed of a few stalwarts, who bemoan the apathy of the rest of the school's parent cohort, and blame poor student performance on parental failure to adequately support their children.

Professional cultures exist in all schools. But there is much less cultural distance between middle class parents and educators in racially, socio-culturally and linguistically homogenous communities. Educators in these communities expect parents to engage with them, and parents have experience in handling professional behavior. Parents are not intimidated by the educators, indeed they are often far more educated. Thus, in affluent communities, accountability relationships develop organically. White, mid-

[9] Lareau, Annette and Erin McNamara Horvat (1999), "Moments of Social Inclusion and Exclusion: Race, Class and Cultural Capital in Family-School Relationships," *Sociology of Education* 72, p 42.

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dle class parents' relationships with schools start from the assumption that they are entitled to access to their children's schools and that their participation in those schools is legitimate. These assumptions shape an implicit —and sometimes explicit—parent power that insures schools' receptivity to parent input, and develops relationships based on the trust that all parties are committed to the maximum academic development of the child. In contrast, poor parents seeking involvement in their children's schools often contend with school defensiveness, hostility and rejection. Too often, poor parents gain access to their school only by mobilizing a large number of people, producing sophisticated leaders to forcefully articulate their vision, and forming strategic alliances with powerful allies.

Parents and communities served by poorly performing schools need the same power that middle-class communities wield. When parents in poorly performing schools challenge educators across class and racial lines, without the power that middle-class parents can employ, school practitioners and district administrators often react by criticizing, dismissing and ridiculing parents and even treating them as threats to school safety. In such environments, parent associations become instruments for socializing parents to comply with school norms and for keeping non-conforming parents out.

In poorly performing schools, educators' efforts to involve parents and families must move beyond the parent association to building relationships based on accountability to families for educating their children successfully. Schools must begin by developing the trust necessary to overcome the layers of suspicion, cynicism and despair accumulated over the decades of separating home, community and school.

Part II. Creating new relationships between schools and communities

How can we help schools re-connect to the students, parents and communities that depend on them to deliver a high quality education? How can parents and community groups help schools define schooling problems and strategies for improvement? How can parents and communities hold schools accountable for helping their children succeed? We propose the notion of community accountability as a way to conceptualize, understand and measure the existence of the critical relationships between schools, parents and communities. The new community accountability we seek has four key dimensions: transparency, representation, power, and oversight. What follows is a framework for that new community accountability, accompanied by a set of indicators to assess the extent of school, district and system-wide implementation.

1. Indicators of community accountability: Transparency

Transparency is our term for the school system's ability to produce information about student and school educational outcomes. We include data that identifies student academic performance, as well as critical school-level inputs (for example, data on teacher and administrator experience, school expenditures and building conditions). Transparency helps parents and community constituencies understand what resources schools have and how well or how poorly schools are educating their children.

Such transparency involves more than making data available, as the school system currently does on the Web and through its Annual School Reports; such web-based reporting needs to complement face-to-face efforts. Individual parents need opportunities for detailed discussion with teachers to jointly examine their own child's work, analyze progress or lack of progress, and consider strategies for learning improvement. Parent-teacher conferences as currently structured do not provide sufficient time, privacy, preparation or focus to meet these requirements. Only deep structural changes in school organization, scheduling, professional development and staff support can produce the pre-conditions for the extensive and intensive parent-teacher dialogues about improving student achievement necessary to involve parents as partners in students' learning.

Improving school-level academic performance requires similar communication, dialogue about effectiveness, and discussion of strategies. Now that the New York State and City Departments of Education are producing much more data about school-level outcomes, transparency requires effective communication of those data, through electronic and paper reports in easy-to-understand formats frequently disseminated to parents and community constituencies. Effective communication of data needs to be accompanied by school-level dialogues that bring together administrators, teachers, parents, neighborhood organizations and community constituencies. Through such dialogues, principals should make semi-annual reports on the State of the School, share data defining school performance and instructional practice, identify school strengths and shortcomings, and discuss strategies for improvement.

An example of such school-level dialogues is the type of accountability forum developed by the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC). BASRC's forums bring together school and parent constituencies to review data about school outcomes, to examine teacher instructional practices, and to discuss school-level improvement strategies. These reviews of school performance are designed to establish a tradition of open discussion of school strengths, limitations and how the school will move towards improvement, among practitioners, parents and community constituencies. Community organizing groups in the Industrial Areas Foundation network in Texas have helped school administrators convene and host similar sessions in schools participating in the Alliance Schools network.[10]

[10] Shirley, Dennis, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

Transparency also requires district-level dialogues about performance and improvement. Superintendents should make semi-annual presentations about the State of the District, propose improvement strategies, and discuss their presentations with parents and community constituents in an open forum. Many suburban and rural school boards have developed effective community-wide dialogues focused on data-rich examinations of district performance and discussions of strategies for improvement. Several local public education foundations, in Grand Rapids, Michigan and Wake County, North Carolina, among others, have developed public forums that bring school practitioners, parents, and community constituencies together for extended dialogues analyzing district performance and developing strategies for improvement.

We believe that every New York City school and district needs to adopt transparency mechanisms that help educators forge effective links between parents, communities and their schools. Efforts to achieve such transparency could be measured through a series of indicators, tracked over time, and serve as the basis for an annual report by the Mayor to parents, students and community constituencies.

Indicators of increased transparency in the school system:

- Useful information about school resources and school and student performance is disseminated widely.
- Frequent discussions take place between parents and educators about student performance and how it can be improved.
- Public dialogues about how to improve school and district performance occur at both the school and district level.
- Annual state of the school, district and system reports are delivered by principals, superintendents and the Mayor.
- All discussions are conducted in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways.

2. Indicators of community accountability: Representation

Parents Associations (PAs) provide formal means of representation for parents, with parents annually electing a slate of PA officers. Because poorly performing schools usually harbor barely existing, under-resourced and often collusive PAs or PTAs, they are incapable of tackling their school's problems. In these schools, the educational interests of the school's parent population are rarely represented effectively. One way to approach this problem is to develop new and broader forms of representation. Suppose parents in all poorly performing schools could elect a different form of PA or PTA representation? Why not allow community organizations to petition for representation, much as unions petition to represent a plant's workers through a National Labor Relations Board-mediated election?

More than a dozen independent, community-based organizations are organizing for education reform in poor neighborhoods across the city. These organizations work for the collective advancement of the neighborhood's children analogously to the way middle class parents work for the advancement of their own children. They challenge, for example, inadequate school facilities, ineffective school leadership, the over-referral of African-American students to special education, the concentration of inexperienced teachers in the city's lowest performing schools, and low high school graduation rates.

Yet, because schools are often so isolated from their communities, staff and administrators have little knowledge of these organizations. The current governance structure gives schools no incentives to engage them in working relationships. If the community group is not represented on school leadership team (SLT) or parent association, the principal can (and often does) easily dismiss its participation as illegitimate, deny it access to information about the school, refuse to engage in dialogue or debate about improvement, or tell it to bring its concerns to the parent association.

Why not allow parents to vote on whether a new parents' organization should be developed and staffed by a community-based organization working with families served by the school? A community group might do a more effective job of holding the school accountable than the PA or PTA. If it failed, it could be voted out at the next election.

We raise this example as one way to improve accountability in poorly performing schools. Perhaps few community groups would welcome the responsibility to develop the school support roles that many PAs routinely play. Perhaps specific functions of review and discussion of school performance, rather than PA representation and management, could be configured for community groups with a stake in helping schools improve their performance. What we are suggesting is that parent and community

representation should transcend the PA and PTA and involve the broader community in reviewing school performance and helping schools improve. In every neighborhood, a far wider range of stakeholders has an interest in helping schools do better than we currently engage.

If the community school boards are abolished, there will be neither a formal role for parent participation beyond the school level, nor a formal venue for public discussion and debate of district-wide educational issues. A reflexive way to solve this problem is to create parent councils at the district level, composed of representatives elected from PAs/PTAs or School Leadership Teams. Indeed, such structures have already been proposed, though how they might contribute to improving the relationships between schools and community constituencies, or helping schools improve their performance, is unclear. From our perspective, effective structures to improve student and school performance must include representation broader than PAs, PTAs and SLTs; community groups and other stakeholders also need to be represented to develop the new relationships that community accountability requires.

How can these new relationships based on broader representation be developed? Across the country, several districts have developed collaborations among elected officials, service providers, community organizations and school systems to improve student and school outcomes. The successes of collaboratives in El Paso, San Francisco, Sacramento, Charlotte-Mecklenburg and other urban districts suggest new mechanisms for expanded representation that can hold schools and districts accountable to community constituencies for their students' performance.

Indicators of expanded representation in schooling dialogues:

- **School discussions include a wide range of parent and community constituencies, including independent parent groups and community organizations.**
- **School and district leaders value the perspectives of these diverse stakeholders and solicit their input in discussions about school and district performance.**

Beyond the PA: Organizing for school improvement

New Settlement Apartments (NSA) began organizing parents in 1997 in response to widespread concern about the quality of neighborhood schools among public school parents living in the NSA housing development in the South Bronx. Parents formed the NSA Parent Action Committee (PAC), which began by looking at the Annual School Report of a nearby elementary school. They found that less than a fifth of the students could read at grade level. Yet the school was removed from the New York State's list of low performing schools (SURR).

. . .

Parents invited a district representative to address their concerns about their children's low reading scores. But when the district representative ignored their questions and dismissed their data presentation, parents decided to launch a campaign to improve the school. They gathered petition signatures from parents, met with local institutions and churches to enlist their support, held meetings with Board of Education officials, and staged demonstrations and press conferences to call for school improvement. These efforts ultimately led to the resignation of the school's principal who both parents and teachers believed was ineffective.

. . .

Local school and district officials repeatedly used the parent association as an excuse to turn away the NSA parents for not being "the official parent organization." Parent association members felt loyal to the school's principal and were hostile to NSA parents. A national study of school reform organizing by the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy found that parent leaders in most community organizations are refused essential school documents like the school's improvement plan and annual performance review, and berated by school administrators for not participating in the parent association.[11] Ironically, the parent association, the entity created to strengthen parent involvement in low performing schools, has become a means by which the school system deflects parent-led school improvement efforts.

. . .

Suppose the parent activism conducted by PAC were the norm in urban schools serving poor neighborhoods and communities of color. What if parents could choose such an organization to represent them in holding school and district officials accountable? As unique public institutions charged with the responsibility of educating children who will shape the city and the country's future, public schools should provide parents of those children with the right to choose the organizations that represent them.

. . .

One way to do this is through a clearly defined public process, perhaps articulated and monitored by the New York State Department of Education. Through that process, parents in failing schools could choose to be represented by a traditional parent association, or one organized by one of the neighborhood's community groups working with families served by the school. Once selected, the group would serve as the legitimate representative of the school's parents, with the authority to negotiate on their behalf. School and district staff and administrators would be required to recognize, legitimate and meet with the community group, to make available data about school performance, and to discuss priorities and plans for school improvement. The prior PA or PTA would be disbanded until the next electoral cycle, when it could compete with the community group to represent parent interests.

. . .

[11] Kavitha Mediratta, Norm Fruchter and Anne Lewis, *Organizing for School reform: How Communities Are Finding their Voice and Reclaiming their Public Schools*, (New York: NYU Institute for Education & Social Policy, 2002).

3. Indicators of community accountability: Power

The new structures to achieve transparency and representation we suggest above are based on dialogue and discussion about student and school performance. But dialogues and discussion alone won't guarantee that parents and communities can work in new ways with schools to improve student performance. Suppose district and school administrators attempt to dominate these new forms of dialogue, by exercising their traditional modes of professional expertise. Suppose, as a result, they recreate traditional forms of intimidation and exclusion. Or suppose district and school administrators ignore their responsibility to participate in those dialogues, and dismiss the opportunities to create these new relationships. What can help parents and community groups ensure that schools and districts help develop these new relationships?

One possibility is to mandate the development of the new accountability mechanisms suggested above, and to make principals and superintendents responsible for their implementation. Failures to implement them could be appealed, through existing avenues, to the Chancellor, or to the oversight mechanisms we suggest below. Another possibility is to involve the School Leadership Team (SLT) in school-based accountability, as well as in instructional planning and budgeting. There are various suggestions currently in play for strengthening the SLT; many of them focus on giving the SLT the power to hire and fire the principal, as Chicago's Local School Councils do. Because the SLT is the major governance entity at the school level, elects half its members from the school's parent body, and can add community group representation, we think that the SLT should be given the accountability power to conduct the principal's annual evaluation. This evaluation should be implemented in an open forum, perhaps following the accountability dialogue based on the principal's State of the School report that we outlined above.

Our design for community accountability calls for dialogues about student performance and school instructional practice at both school and district levels. Just as the principal would be required to initiate the school-level dialogue with a State of the School report, so the district superintendent would be required to open the district-level dialogue with a State of the District report. Just as we recommend that the SLT lead a public process of evaluating the principal, we recommend that the superintendent's performance be publicly evaluated at the district-level. Whatever form of district-level governance is ultimately legislated, we recommend that the new governance structure convene an annual district-wide forum to discuss the superintendent's State of the District report and to conduct the superintendent's evaluation. The findings of that evaluation should be reported to the Chancellor with recommendations for continuance or termination.

Indicators of increased parent and community power:

- **Teacher performance evaluations and appointments consider efforts to engage parents in frequent, regular discussions about student performance.**
- **School and district administrator appointments involve significant input from diverse parent and community constituencies.**
- **School accountability forums are convened to review the state of the school and the principal's performance, and make recommendations for reappointment.**
- **District-wide accountability forums that are open to the public are convened to review the state of the district and the superintendent's performance and make recommendations for appointment.**

4. Indicators of community accountability: Oversight

Whatever new forms of transparency, representation and power are developed, we see a need for oversight to ensure that the new structures are implemented effectively. An external and independent oversight mechanism, external to districts and schools and independent of the school system and the mayor, is necessary to maintain community accountability in the school system's top-down governance system. Such an external, independent oversight mechanism would provide a forum for investigation, venues for redress of grievance, and the power to enforce change, particularly in poorly performing schools and districts that continue to resist parent and community accountability.

An oversight function could be structured on models of ombuds oversight for public services in western European countries, particularly in Scandinavia and the Netherlands. An ombuds structure could be given sufficient authority and funding so that oversight, investigation and powers to mandate solutions can be carried out, across the city school system. At a minimum, such an Ombuds Office could be charged to oversee the implementation of whatever new accountability structures were created.

Indicators of effective oversight:

- **An independent and external authority investigates and intervenes when school performance is consistently poor, and district and school leaders fail to engage parents and the community.**
- **This office is widely publicized, well known and easy to access.**

Part III. Implementing community accountability in New York City's schools

How can we move towards greater accountability to the communities schools serve, when creating such accountability requires a seismic cultural shift in our schools? If, particularly in low-performing schools, there is very limited capacity to work with parent and community constituencies, mandating parent and community accountability without providing intensive support, guidance, and encouragement will mire these schools and districts in even more failure. But without clear directives from the school system's leadership, schools lack the incentive to explore new parent and community relationships. How can these two conflicting realities be addressed?

A differentiated, flexible and staged process could begin to implement a new system of community accountability in our city schools. First, the Department of Education needs to design an incentive system that gives schools and districts the motivation to move towards developing community accountability. Second, the Department must create a series of indicators to measure progress towards achieving school system accountability to communities. Third, it must concentrate resources on helping principals and teachers in the lowest performing schools and districts learn how to implement new strategies for community accountability—particularly for transparency, representation and power. And finally, the Department must grant more autonomy to schools when they demonstrate success.

Action steps for implementing community accountability:

1) **Design an incentive system to motivate schools and districts to move towards community accountability.**
2) **Adopt indicators (such as those proposed in this paper) to measure progress towards achieving school system accountability to communities.**
3) **Concentrate resources on helping principals and teachers in the lowest performing schools to implement new strategies for community accountability—particularly for transparency, representation and power.**
4) **Grant increasing autonomy to schools when they demonstrate success.**

Training to effectively implement transparency, representation and power can help school and district practitioners redefine their roles and relationships with their communities. New methods for effectively engaging and working with diverse constituencies can be integrated into principal preparation and teacher professional development. Useful models for engagement are emerging from community organizing groups around the country, particularly in California and Texas, where educators participate

in neighborhood walks and home visits to break down the barriers caused by fear, ignorance and stereotypes that prevent the necessary trust, dialogue and joint action from developing.[12]

Moreover, because effective parent and community engagement depends on a new infrastructure of support, new funding streams are essential. Whatever entity—the traditional PA or PTA or a newly elected representational community group—becomes responsible for engaging parents will need sufficient resources to hire staff, secure a meeting space and finance effective outreach, through mailings, phone-banking or other means, to carry out its mission successfully.

Indicators of effective implementation of community accountability:

- **Institutional barriers (such as fees for space, policies that restrict CBO access to schools) are removed to help schools and local community institutions to develop effective partnerships.**
- **Training is provided to district and school leaders on facilitating meaningful relationships with parent and community constituencies.**
- **A separate funding stream is created to support parent and community engagement at the school and district level.**
- **City workers with children in the public schools are given time off without penalty to attend school events; similar policies are adopted by private sector companies with significant percentages of employees who are parents of public school children.**

CONCLUSION

As the New York State legislature considers what should replace community school boards, our city faces key choices about how the future of our school system's governance is structured. We can choose to narrow the debate by focusing only on the merits of a variety of governance alternatives. But if we limit ourselves to considering only new governance arrangements, we risk re-creating the same narrow, formulaic rituals that defeated public participation in the community school board system. Instead, we can engage the urgent task of re-imagining accountability in our schools, and creating the framework for building new relationships among parents, community groups and constituencies, and school practitioners. We believe that developing a new community accountability system that anchors those essential relationships in ongoing efforts to improve schools is the critical task that faces us.

[12] Shirley, Dennis (1997). Furger, Roberta, *Making Connections Between Home and School*, (2002: The George Lucas Educational Foundation).

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